

2015

Perpetration experience and gender predicting empathy with a stranger or acquaintance rapist

Ruby L. Orth
Salisbury University

Suzanne L. Osman
Salisbury University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Orth, Ruby L. and Osman, Suzanne L. (2015) "Perpetration experience and gender predicting empathy with a stranger or acquaintance rapist," *Modern Psychological Studies*: Vol. 21 : No. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps/vol21/iss1/6>

This articles is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals, Magazines, and Newsletters at UTC Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Psychological Studies by an authorized editor of UTC Scholar. For more information, please contact scholar@utc.edu.

Perpetration Experience and Gender Predicting Empathy with a Stranger or Acquaintance Rapist

Ruby L. Orth, and Suzanne L. Osman

Salisbury University

This study examined empathy with a hypothetical rapist based on experimentally varied type of rape (stranger; acquaintance), participant perpetration experience, and gender. Undergraduate students (115 male, 206 female) completed the Rape Perpetrator Empathy-During Subscale and Sexual Experiences Survey. Hypotheses were partially supported. Sexual perpetrators (of acquaintances) reported greater empathy than nonperpetrators, and men reported greater empathy than women. Type of rape was not significant. Findings support past research, but more data from rapists is needed.

Introduction

Rape empathy is defined as the ability to understand the perspective and experience of a rape victim or perpetrator (Smith & Frieze, 2003). Rape victim empathy has been examined as an important factor in the treatment of sex offenders, in rape prevention and education programs on college campuses, and related to rape judgments in the courtroom (Borden, Karr & Caldwell-Colbert, 1988; Deitz, Blackwell, Daley & Bentley, 1982; Foubert & Newberry, 2006; Pithers, 1999; Rice, Chaplin, Harris, & Coutts, 1994; Smith & Frieze, 2003). Although empathy with a rape victim has been studied and discussed to a greater extent than empathy with a rapist, the latter can have important implications in these areas as well (Borden et al., 1988; Deitz et al., 1982; Foubert & Newberry, 2006; Pinzone, Glover, Gidycz, & Jacobs, 1998).

Theoretically, it has been suggested that level of empathy increases with those who share similar experiences (Barnett, Tetreault, Esper, & Bristow, 1986; Deitz et al., 1982; Smith & Frieze, 2003). For example, victims of sexual aggression report greater rape victim empathy than non-victims, and victims assaulted by an acquaintance report greater empathy for an acquaintance rape victim than

a stranger rape victim. Also, perpetrators of sexual aggression report greater empathy with a rapist than non-perpetrators (Osman, 2014; 2011), but empathy with a stranger or acquaintance rapist has not been studied. Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to examine empathy with a hypothetical rapist based on experimentally varied type of rape (stranger; acquaintance), and participant perpetration experience with a known victim. [Given that acquaintance rape is more common than stranger rape (Fisher, Daigle, Cullen & Turner, 2003; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997), participant perpetration experience with an unknown victim was expected to be minimal in the sample]. Also, men have reported greater rape perpetrator empathy than women in past studies, but the inclusion of female perpetrators has been limited (Osman, 2011). Therefore, perpetration experience was measured for both men and women in the current study.

Past research suggests that acquaintance rape is viewed as less severe and more questionable than stranger rape in our society (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Krahe, 1991). For example, stranger rape victims have been perceived as more traumatized, less responsible, and less to blame than

acquaintance rape victims (Bell et al., 1994; Frese, Moya, & Megias, 2004). Women are more likely to take precautions against stranger rape compared to acquaintance rape due to greater fear of stranger rape (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997). Also, stranger rape victims were more likely than acquaintance rape victims to report their rape to authorities, describe their rape as violent, and perceive their experience as rape (Koss, 1985; Koss, Dinero, Seibel & Cox, 1988). Consistent with this, past research demonstrates more favorable responses to rapists who know their victim compared to those who do not. For example, individuals suggest shorter sentences for and assign less blame and responsibility to acquaintance than stranger rapists (Koss et al., 1988; Sleath & Bull, 2010; Viki, Abrams, & Masser, 2004). Although numerous factors (including rape victim empathy) have been studied based on acquaintance versus stranger rape, rape perpetrator empathy has not.

In addition to experience with sexual aggression, another factor that has been associated with judgments regarding rape and rape empathy is gender. For example, women assign more blame to perpetrators in comparison to men (Wakelin & Long, 2003), and are less likely to minimize the severity or significance of a rape situation (Ben-David & Schneider, 2005). Freetly and Kane (1995) suggested that women may have self interest in more broadly defining rape compared to men, as rape victimization experience is more common in women. Female victim prevalence rates have also been suggested to explain past gender differences in rape empathy. Women have been more likely to empathize with a rape victim than men, and men have reported greater empathy with a rapist than women in previous studies (Borden et al., 1988; Smith & Frieze, 2003). However, gender differences are not consistent when sexual aggression experience is taken into account (Osman, 2011; 2014). For example, Osman (2014)

suggested that a history of victimization experience may explain women's greater empathy with a rape victim compared to men, rather than it being just based on gender. Likewise, a history of perpetration experience may also impact gender differences in rape perpetrator empathy, but female perpetrators have been studied minimally in this literature (Osman, 2011).

Hypotheses

Since stranger rape is regarded as a more serious and violent crime than acquaintance rape, there could be more motivation for individuals to disconnect themselves from the perspective of a stranger rapist, but be relatively more willing to understand the perspective of an acquaintance rapist. Furthermore, the more similar an individual's own perpetration experience is to a stranger or acquaintance rapist, the more easily one could empathize with that rapist.

Therefore, it was hypothesized that rape perpetrator empathy would be greater for those participants exposed to a hypothetical acquaintance rapist than for those exposed to a hypothetical stranger rapist, especially for participants who reported that they have personally engaged in sexual perpetration against an acquaintance.

In addition, since the study of female perpetrators has been limited in empathy research, men and women were included in this study to explore how gender and perpetration experience may impact empathy for an acquaintance or stranger rapist.

Method

Participants

Participants were 321 (115 males, 206 female) undergraduate students (mean age 18.78, $SD = 1.13$). Fifty-three percent were freshman, 36% were sophomores, 8% were

juniors and 3% were seniors. All participants reported that they were unmarried (except for one who did not respond), but 41% reported being in a relationship with a partner. Participants reported ethnicities as African/African American (13%), Hispanic/Hispanic American (1%), White/European/European American (79%), Asian American/Asian (3%), and Other (4%). Sixty-eight percent were from a suburban area, 22% from a rural area, and 10% from an urban area.

Measures

Participants completed the During Subscale of the Rape Perpetrator Empathy Scale (REMPD) (Smith & Frieze, 2003) to measure empathy with a rapist during a rape. The Post Subscale of the REMP was not used because it includes items indicating that a rape had been reported to authorities, which is more common in the case of stranger rape (Fisher et al., 2003) and, thus, may create bias toward stranger rape. The REMPD was experimentally modified to create two relationship type conditions (stranger or acquaintance) between the victim and perpetrator. It consists of 7 items rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strong disagreement*) to 5 (*strong agreement*). For example, "I can imagine how a person who rapes (a stranger/ an acquaintance) might feel during an actual rape." In the current study, the Cronbach alpha was .82. In the original study the Cronbach alpha was .79 (Smith & Frieze, 2003).

The Sexual Experiences Survey (SESP) (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987) was used to identify those with sexual perpetration experience, who were then asked to report their relationship to their victim(s). The SESP consists of 10 "yes" or "no" questions designed to measure four different types of sexual perpetration experience (i.e., sexual contact;

sexual coercion; attempted rape; rape). For instance, "Have you engaged in sexual intercourse when someone didn't want to because you threatened or used some degree of physical force (twisting their arm, holding them down etc.) to make them." Those answering "yes" to one or more questions were categorized as having perpetration experience. Those who did not answer "yes" to any of the questions were categorized as having no perpetration experience. The Cronbach alpha for the SESP in the current study was .70. Koss and Gidycz (1985) reported a Cronbach alpha of .89, but sexual perpetration does not necessarily involve answering "yes" to more than one item on the scale.

Procedure

This study was approved by institutional review board. Participants completed questionnaires consisting of demographic information, the REMPD, and the SESP sitting every other seat away or further from each other in a classroom setting on a college campus. After providing informed consent they filled out the surveys individually and anonymously. When finished, participants submitted their surveys in an anonymous drop bag and were provided references for counseling options.

Results

Only those reporting no perpetration experience ($n = 266$) or perpetration against an acquaintance ($n = 32$) were included in the analyses. The sample size reporting stranger perpetration was small ($n = 2$), as expected. Therefore, these participants were excluded to avoid confounding the data. Those who were missing data ($n = 21$) were also excluded.

A 2x2x2 (relationship type condition x perpetration experience x gender of participant) ANOVA revealed no interactions. However, there was a significant main effect

for perpetration experience, $F(1, 296) = 6.72$, $p = .01$, $\text{partial } \eta^2 = .023$. Perpetrators ($M = 2.09$, $SD = .87$, $n = 32$) reported greater empathy than non-perpetrators ($M = 1.70$, $SD = .74$, $n = 266$). There was also a main effect for gender of participant, $F(1, 296) = 6.2$, $p = .013$, $\text{partial } \eta^2 = .021$. Men ($M = 1.96$, $SD = .86$, $n = 101$) reported higher levels of empathy with a rapist than women ($M = 1.63$, $SD = .69$, $n = 197$). See Table 1 for all other group means, standard deviations, and cell sizes.

Discussion

Consistent with past research, sexual perpetrators had greater empathy with a rapist than non-perpetrators and men had greater empathy than women (Osman, 2011; Smith & Frieze, 2003). Unexpectedly, relationship type of rape had no effect. Without sharing the experience of perpetration, non-perpetrators may lack the relative ability to empathize with a rapist compared to perpetrators, regardless of rape relationship type. Those who have engaged in sexual perpetration against an acquaintance may report greater empathy with a rapist than non-perpetrators given that they share a more similar experience, even in a stranger rape situation. Also, perhaps men empathize with a rapist more than women because of cultural expectations and incidence rates of men as aggressors and women as victims. However, although men may be expected to be more sexually aggressive than women, it is important to note that women can be sexual perpetrators too, as was the case in the present study. In fact, there were more female ($n = 20$) than male ($n = 12$) perpetrators, and these results suggest that the experience of perpetration will increase rape perpetrator empathy regardless of whether the perpetrator is male or female.

Related to perpetrator gender, it is also important to recognize a possible limitation in the study design. The gender of the

hypothetical rapist in each condition was not provided, so participants may have assumed the rapist was male, which may have limited female perpetrators ability to understand the perspective of the rape perpetrator. For example, past research suggests that male perpetrators empathize more than female perpetrators with a male rapist, but this gender difference disappears with a female rapist (Osman, 2011).

It should also be noted that overall rape perpetrator empathy scores were relatively low (falling below the midpoint of the scale), even for the participants who have sexually perpetrated. This may be because only a small minority of the sexual perpetrators in this sample reported engaging in behaviors that fit legal definitions of rape ($n = 4$). The other sexual perpetrators reported engaging in attempted rape ($n = 5$), sexual coercion ($n = 8$) or sexual contact ($n = 15$). Since theory suggests that empathy will increase with those who share similar experience, rape perpetrator empathy scores may be greater among those who have raped, given that their experience would be most similar to a hypothetical rapist, compared to those who have perpetrated other types of sexual assault. This could be examined in a future study.

In addition to the lesser number of rapists than other types of sexual perpetrators, the lesser number of male than female perpetrators, and the potential assumption that the hypothetical rapist was male, there were a few other limitations in the present study. The sample consisted of undergraduate students and was largely comprised of women overall ($n = 197$). Also, the sample size of perpetrators was small ($n = 32$), and included only those who were acquainted with their victims. Therefore, due to study limitations, caution should be taken in drawing conclusions regarding how perpetration experience, type of rape, and gender may interact to influence rape perpetrator empathy.

Future researchers may want to specify the gender of a target perpetrator, and include more male and female participants who report being perpetrators of sexual assault and rape. It would also be interesting to examine empathy with a rapist in perpetrators of strangers, if more of these participants could be obtained in a future sample. Perhaps noncollege samples could be examined, including incarcerated sexual offenders.

Continuing research examining how gender and different types of sexual perpetration experiences may impact empathy with a rapist may benefit society by informing the design of rape education and treatment programs. In addition, it could increase understanding of jury decision making processes. For instance, if a jury member in a rape case has engaged in sexual perpetration, his or her decision may be influenced by empathy with the accused. Also, understanding that perpetrators may empathize with rapists could inform treatment programs to address this aspect of their thought processes. Thus, making contributions to the research in this area may have implications for judicial, rehabilitative and educational efforts.

References

- Barnett, M. A., Tetreault, P. A., Esper, J. A., & Bristow, A. R. (1986). Similarity and empathy: The experience of rape. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 126(1), 47-49.
- Bell, S. T., Kuriloff, P. J., & Lottes, I. (1994). Understanding attributions of blame in stranger rape and date rape situations: An examination of gender, race, identification, and students' social perceptions of rape victims. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 24, 1719-1734.
- Ben-David, S., & Schneider, O. (2005). Rape perceptions, gender role attitudes, and victim-perpetrator acquaintance. *Sex Roles*, 53(5-6), 385-399.
- Borden, L. A., Karr, S. K. & Caldwell-Colbert, A. T. (1988). Effects of a university rape prevention program on attitudes and empathy towards rape. *Journal of College Student Development*, 29, 132-136.
- Deitz, S. R., Blackwell, K. T., Daley, P. C. & Bentley, B. J. (1982). Measurement of empathy toward rape victims and rapists. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 42, 372-384.
- Fisher, B. S., Daigle, L. E., Cullen, F. T., & Turner, M. G. (2003). Reporting sexual victimization to the police and others: Results from a national-level study of college women. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 30, 6-38.
- Foubert, J. D., & Newberry, J. T. (2006). Effects of two versions of an empathy-based rape prevention program on fraternity men's survivor empathy, attitudes, and behavioral intent to commit rape or sexual assault. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47, 133-148.
- Freely, A. H., & Kane, E. W. (1995). Men's and women's perceptions of non-consensual sexual intercourse. *Sex Roles*, 33(11-12), 785-802.
- Frese, B., Moya, M., & Megias, J. (2004). Social perceptions of rape: How rape myth acceptance modulates the influence of situational factors. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 19, 143-161.
- Hickman, S. E. & Muehlenhard, C. L. (1997). College women's fears and precautionary behaviors relating to acquaintance and stranger rape. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 257-547.
- Koss, M. P. & Gidycz, C. A. (1985). Sexual experiences survey: Reliability and validity. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 53, 422-423.
- Koss, M. P., Gidycz, C. A. & Wisniewski, N. (1987). The scope of rape: Incidence and prevalence of sexual aggression and victimization in a national sample of higher education students. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 55, 162-170.
- Koss, M. P. (1985). The hidden rape victim: Personality, attitudinal and situational characteristics. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 9, 193.
- Krahe, B. (1991). Police officers' definitions of rape: A prototype study. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 1, 223-244.
- Osman, S. L. (2011). Predicting rape empathy based on victim, perpetrator, and participant gender, and history of sexual aggression. *Sex Roles*, 64(7-8), 506-515.
- Osman, S. L. (2014). Participant sexual victimization by an acquaintance and gender predicting empathy with an acquaintance or stranger rape victim. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 33, No. 8, pp. 732-742.
- Pinzone-Glover, H. A., Gidycz, C. A., & Jacobs, C. (1998). An acquaintance rape prevention program: Effects on attitudes toward women, rape-related attitudes, and perceptions of rape scenarios. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 22, 605-621.
- Pithers, W. D. (1999). Empathy: Definition, enhancement and relevance to the treatment of sexual abusers. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 14, 257-284.
- Rice, M. E., Chaplin, T. C., Harris, G. T., & Coutts, J. (1994). Empathy for the victim and sexual arousal among rapists and nonrapists. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 9, 435-449.
- Sleath, E. & Bull, R. (2010). Male rape victim and perpetrator blaming. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 25, No. 6, 969-988.

Smith, C. A. & Frieze, I. H. (2003). Examining rape empathy from the perspective of the victim and the assailant. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 33, 476-498.

Viki, G. T., Abrams, D., & Masser, B. (2004). Evaluating stranger and acquaintance rape. *Law and Human Behavior*, 28(3), 295-303.

Wakelin, A., & Long, K. M. (2003) Effects of victim gender and sexuality on attributions of blame to rape victims. *Sex Roles*, 49, 477-487.

Appendix

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Cell Sizes for Rape-Perpetrator Empathy Scale Scores

| Perpetration Experience | Participant Gender | Relationship Type Condition | M | SD | N |
|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|------|------|----|
| Yes | Male | Stranger | 2.33 | 1.08 | 6 |
| | | Acquaintance | 2.33 | 1.01 | 6 |
| | Female | Stranger | 2.09 | .92 | 11 |
| | | Acquaintance | 1.76 | .55 | 9 |
| No | Male | Stranger | 1.90 | .92 | 44 |
| | | Acquaintance | 1.92 | .74 | 45 |
| | Female | Stranger | 1.49 | .59 | 94 |
| | | Acquaintance | 1.71 | .73 | 83 |

Note. Perpetrators had greater empathy with a rapist than non-perpetrators. Men had greater empathy than women.